

**Testimony of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut  
Before the Judiciary Committee  
February 24, 2013**

**IN SUPPORT OF  
SB 54 AN ACT CONCERNING COLLABORATION BETWEEN BOARDS OF EDUCATION  
AND LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSONNEL**

Senator Coleman, Representative Fox, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Daniela Giordano and I am the Public Policy Director with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut. NAMI Connecticut is the state affiliate of NAMI, the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all those affected by mental illness. NAMI Connecticut offers support groups, educational programs, and advocacy for improved services, more humane treatment and an end to stigma and economic and social discrimination. We represent individuals who live with mental illness and parents and family members of individuals living with mental illness. I am writing to you today on behalf of NAMI Connecticut to support raised bill SB 54, *An Act Concerning Collaboration Between Boards of Education and Law Enforcement Personnel*.

Many schools have police stationed in them without clear or formal guidelines governing daily interactions. And even though federal guidelines<sup>1</sup> stress that the role of law enforcement personnel in schools should be to protect students and be informal mentors, the presence of police officers in schools (oftentimes referred to as school resource officers or SROs) can bring an increase in the number of student arrests. The majority of these arrests are not for serious or violent offenses. Rather, these arrests occur for low-level, non-violent offenses, such as breach of peace and disorderly conduct<sup>2</sup> which in many cases are the result of unmet behavioral and mental health needs. Therefore, it is necessary for schools and police to collaborate and develop a written formal agreement, as SB 54 requires, to detail the roles and responsibilities of police stationed in schools.

As noted above, many of the behaviors exhibited by children that lead to school-based arrests are often the result of **unmet behavioral and mental health needs**. It is widely recognized that twenty percent of all children have a diagnosable mental health condition. Drop-out rates among students classified as Emotionally Disturbed (ED) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are alarmingly high, over 50%. Additionally, 65-70% of youth in juvenile detention have a diagnosable behavioral health condition. Rather than pushing children out of school for difficult behaviors, we must work towards creating a positive school climate for learning and social development so that every child has an opportunity for success.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education. Guiding Principles – a Resources Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline. January 2014. Available at: <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> State of Connecticut, Judicial Branch. School-Based Arrest Distribution SY 2012-13 statewide



# NAMI Connecticut

We all want our schools to *be* safe places. And, we want schools to be environments where children and youth *feel* safe, meaning a place where they are valued and supported, especially when they are struggling with extra challenges such as behavioral or mental health challenges. In order to have both, we need to support schools and school resource officers to clarify their own roles in the school community.

Thank you for your time and attention. Please let us know if we can answer any questions for you.

Respectfully submitted,

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NAMI Connecticut